

**March 10, 2019 First Sunday in Lent**

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**GOSPEL**

**Luke 4:1-13**

The holy gospel according to Saint Luke, the fourth chapter.

**Glory to you, O Lord.**

<sup>1</sup>Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, <sup>2</sup>where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. <sup>3</sup>The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” <sup>4</sup>Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’ ”

<sup>5</sup>Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. <sup>6</sup>And the devil said to him, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. <sup>7</sup>If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” <sup>8</sup>Jesus answered him, “It is written,

‘Worship the Lord your God,  
and serve only him.’ ”

<sup>9</sup>Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, <sup>10</sup>for it is written,

‘He will command his angels concerning you,  
to protect you,’

<sup>11</sup>and

‘On their hands they will bear you up,  
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’ ”

<sup>12</sup>Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’ ” <sup>13</sup>When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

The gospel of the Lord.

**Praise to you, O Christ.**

In so many ways, Lent is about identity. So is faith, itself, really. And Lent is a journey into the heart of faith. And when we arrive there at the heart of faith...we find that it is a place where Jesus has set a table...because he is always already there...and he offers us what we need.

This day...the first Sunday in Lent...is the first station along the road we travel in this season. And every year on this week...we hear a different telling of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness...

We often think of this Lenten journey as a time when we follow in Jesus' footsteps...but as we consider how Jesus is tempted in these forty days...I think it helps to remember that Jesus' temptation is tailor-made...just for him...because in the end ...I think temptation is about being pulled away from your identity. (We live in a very weird world...where temptation has been turned into something sexy...and we often talk about guilt in terms of pleasure...but we would do well not to domesticate temptation...not when we think about it for Jesus or ourselves.) Temptation...is that thing that lies to us about what really matters and who we really are...and in ways that are so easy to believe...because the voice of temptation knows us so well...what we really want...and what we are most afraid and ashamed of. In this way, Jesus' temptation might help us make a blueprint for resisting our own...but it is also and equally important to show us who Jesus is...

As we hear the story...the first thing we might remember is what we would have just heard just before this if we were reading Luke right through. We'd have heard his birth story, of course...and about how the Holy Spirit came down from the sky at his baptism. And just before we hear the words that were spoken today, we hear a recitation of Jesus' ancestors...including King David...Jesse and Boaz...and Jacob...Isaac and Abraham...and Noah...and Adam.

So, yes...Jesus' identity is a huge part of the story.

The Holy Spirit has now led Jesus into the wilderness after his baptism. And here he is met by a tempter...which is really what the word "devil" means. The text says that he was tempted for 40 days...so we most likely don't have a full transcript of their conversation...but we hear enough to discern a pattern in their sparring. Jesus has been without food long enough to be hungry, when the tempter offers a stone...and tells him he should make it into bread. But Jesus refuses...leaning on words from Deuteronomy. And he does the same, when the tempter shows him all the worldly power he can offer...(through a pretty flimsily-worded contract that probably wouldn't hold up in court). Jesus summons Deuteronomy again. And finally, the tempter somehow whisks him to the top of the temple in Jerusalem...and this time he has his own Scripture to head Jesus off...the promise from the Psalms that the angels will protect God's faithful one. But Jesus returns one last time to Deuteronomy...and says no...that it is not right to test God. Then the tempter disappears...with the ominous pronouncement that he left "until an opportune time."

Jesus rehearses again and again, words from Scripture...that he knew by heart. Of course, we aren't surprised to hear that Jesus knew them. I mean, he's Jesus. But the truth is, that he has presumably grown up going to the synagogue every Sabbath. He has studied. He may have just woken up with the whole Torah already in his brain. But more likely, he was like many of God's people in that time...and had learned Scripture carefully, by heart. It's not something we do often in our tradition...but it is a powerful tool for remembering who you are. If you are still looking for a Lenten discipline, maybe learning some verses that help you remember who and whose you are would be a good one.

Jesus' knowledge of his own identity is the foundation from which he rebukes temptation...and stays within his purpose and plan.

Ritualizing identity can be so important. From college fight songs to the logo stickers we slap on our computers or cars (or car top carriers, in my house)...The passage we read from Deuteronomy today...the very book Jesus was quoting...was about a ritual of identity. The feast of the first fruits involved the recitation, "A wandering Amarean was my ancestor..." and it recounts an identity of being a stranger, poor, vulnerable, enslaved...and the recipient of a promise... so that when the fruits of that promise grew...the one who harvested remembered who they really belonged to. Then, in a ritual, they shared that meal with the most vulnerable in their land - strangers, orphans, widows, and the Levites who didn't own any land, themselves. They remembered who they were, and then they enacted it.

This is very much like what worship and our offerings to the church do for us now, too. We don't come to worship because this is the only hour we intend to think about or live as children of God. We do not put money in the offering plate or send it to church because that is the only time we intend to be generous with the gifts God entrusts to us. We do these things to remind us who we are, so we remember who and whose we are the rest of the time...so we remember that none of this belongs to us...and live accordingly.

Some fellow pastors were saying how this idea reminded them of a joke...set in the far future...when scientific advances have progressed and a group of scientists has managed to replicate the very act of God's creation of humanity. And they tell God, very excited to display their ability. And God is kind enough to oblige them and comes to their lab and says they would love to see them do it. And the scientists very proudly begin to gather up dirt and mold it into a form...but God interrupts them...and says..."Wait, wait, wait. It doesn't count unless you use your own dirt."

Jesus summons the words, and walks through forty days without food...without giving in to the temptation to be anything other than who he was made to be. He is faithful to his identity. He doesn't abandon it for material comfort, power, or the assurance of God's

protection in the face of danger. In fact, this ritual is only a foreshadowing of how fully he will give up all of those things to live out his identity as the Son of God.

And this identity is never in question. In fact, I'll leave you with one little nerdy bit to underscore this point. Remember all those "if" statements the tempter throws at Jesus? "If you are the Son of God..." "If you will worship me..." "If you are the Son of God..." They are not all exactly the same, if you dig back into the Greek. There are different types of conditional phrases...and without going too far into the grammar weeds...I want you to know...that even the tempter knows who Jesus is. Those first and third "ifs" could be better read as "since." "*Since* you are the son of God." The devil already knows who Jesus is. He *knows* Jesus is the Son of God. The only real "if" is in the second of the three temptations... "If you will worship me." And that "if" is categorically shot down by Jesus.

Jesus knows who he is. And so to the powers that would try to pull him from his purpose. And you know what? Those powers know who we are, too. And we feel them...and they try to pull us from our purpose and our identity. But you know who else knows who we are? The one who was strong enough to say "no" to temptation's face. Jesus knows who he is...and he knows who you are. And he is about to show us how far he will go, to never let us anyone else keep us from him...

Thanks be to God. Amen.